The Melville Society NEWSLETTER

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The 1955 meeting of the Society was held at the Newberry Library, Chicago, on December 27. President Harrison Hayford presided over a program on "The Interpretation of *Billy Budd*," and members of the library staff prepared a related exhibit of *Billy Budd* materials.

The first paper, by Olive Fite of Western Illinois State College, offered "A Brief Summary of *Billy Budd* Criticism." In contrast with numerous critics who regard the work as Melville's *nunc dimittis* — if not, in Grant Watson's phrase, his "testament of acceptance," Miss Fite considered the more recent "dissenters," those who interpret *Billy Budd* as an exercise in irony concealing from the unwary reader a bitter and pessimistic meaning. She also noted the stress laid by some commentators on those autobiographical, political, or religious implications which they find in the story. The most recent criticism depends heavily upon matters of tone and attitude — Melville's or his interpreters'.

Richard H. Fogle of Tulane University, speaking on "Irony in *Billy Budd*," also distinguished the "ironist" critics from others who either emphasize its "benedictory" quality or, with Stanley Edgar Hyman, deny that interpretation is even possible. Present in *Billy Budd*, he held, is an irony neither of concealment nor of deceit. The work, like Melville's world in general, is indeed both ironic and ambiguous; its interpretation is unusually difficult because Melville himself, not having really finished its composition, had not finally settled a number of points in the manuscript. Despite the lurking irony of such passages as that referring to the story of Orpheus, which offers a justification of authoritarian management of the ship's crew by exalting the importance of "measured forms," Fogle regards the novel as essentially tragic rather than ironic. Its irony lies in that "it means more, not other, than it seems to say." The ironist critics have fixed only upon what they interpret as destructively ironic elements; Fogle calls attention to its tragic qualities and devices, such as magnification of the characters, its fitting subject matter, the use of reversal (*à la Aristotle*) in its main plot, and the tragic reconciliation near its conclusion. As tragedy *Billy Budd* necessarily contains tragic irony, but it presents the irony of fate with "neither a scream nor a sneer."

The third paper, by William Braswell of Purdue University, considered *"Billy Budd* as an 'Inside Narrative.'" Braswell finds complementary rather than conflicting meanings in the novel, among them an "inside narrative" (in Melville's words) of a tragic conflict in its author's spiritual life. He does not read the work as an allegory, however, since it is composed of shifting symbols and allusions which grow in richness on re-reading. Budd and Claggart repeat the antithetical pattern of heart versus head found in Melville's earlier works, which in turn grew out of an opposition present in his own spiritual life. Heart and head were in balance for Melville himself until the crisis which followed *Moby-Dick*. *Billy Budd* reflects that crisis, Vere, the adjudicator between Budd and Claggart, being the key figure. Braswell notes that Melville himself raises the question of Vere's mental balance; Melville as narrator (*contra* Lawrence Thompson) is sympathetic toward him, emphasizing the external pressures which influenced his decision in Budd's case and the suffering— greater than Billy's — which Vere undergoes. Billy reflects the young Melville; Vere is like the older Melville who curbed his youthful, heart-inspired rebellion. Billy's last words, "God bless Captain Vere," are not ironic; those of Vere himself show that his own affection was directed not toward his king but toward Billy. Men to Melville are "cross-bearers all," to borrow a phrase from *Clarel;* and *"Billy Budd* tells how he bore his own cross."

Following informal discussion of the papers came a brief business session, during which Laurence Barrett of Kalamazoo College was elected a member of the Executive Committee (term expires 1960). President Hayford read a letter from Gil Wilson announcing his gift to the Society of two of his illustrations for *Moby-Dick* and a set of colored slides of all his drawings. This gift is in return for the Society's endorsement of his current lecture tour. A call from the floor that a membership list be distributed by the secretary received general approval.

Another suggestion was made to the effect that the Society use its good offices to "get Melville into high school anthologies" and thus enhance his reputation with the rising generation. Willard Thorp asked the members to consider future organization into a section of the American Literature Group of the Modern Language Association, but no definite action was taken.

Finally considered was the advisability of reactivating and strengthening the Publications Committee, first established at the 1951 meeting. After discussion it was moved by Laurence Barrett, seconded by Willard Thorp, and unanimously voted that the Executive Committee be directed to look into the matter and report its action at the 1956 meeting. At this point the meeting adjourned.

Approximately 25 members and guests were in attendance.

—Merton M. Sealts,
Acting Secretary

NOTE: Members of the Executive Committee for 1956 are the following: Nathalia Wright, president for 1956 (term on committee expires 1958); Howard C. Horsford (1959); Laurence Barrett (1960); Walter E. Bezanson (1956), and Harrison Hayford (1957). Tyrus Hillway is secretary (1957).

AHAB'S HAT

Of all the hats disappearing into the sea in *Moby-Dick* (Flask throws his overboard in Chapter XLVIII, and Queequeg's is blown from his head by an air eddy in Chapter LXXXVII), the one most portentous with symbolism is Ahab's, dramatically snatched by a wild hawk and carried away forever (Chapter CXXX). Partly because of the foreshadowing of this event in the earlier chapters, it becomes an artistic triumph of the literary artist. Yet the reader is tempted to suspect an inconsistency when Ahab, having lost his hat in one chapter, appears only two chapters later wearing the same headpiece or a similar one, which plays an important symbolical part in the action of the final three days of the story.

The piece of clothing in question is a *slouch hat*, and it serves to provide certain clues to Ahab's character. In Chapter CXXXII, in a moment of emotion, Ahab drops a tear "from beneath his slouched hat" into the sea. On the first day of the chase (Chapter CXXXIV) he is seen "to and fro pacing, beneath his slouched hat," and that night "slouching his hat, (he stands) there till dawn." On the following day he is described as "slouched Ahab" (Chapter CXXXV).

Melville's purpose in drawing attention to the slouch hat of Ahab seems to be a conscious one and is perhaps intended to force a comparison between Ahab and Father Mapple's Jonah. For Jonah (Chapter IX) is berated as "most contemptible and worthy of all scorn; with slouched hat and guilty eye, skulking from his God . . ." Ahab seems almost a reincarnation of Jonah as, like the prophet, he forswears his cabin, and the crew sees him "standing in the cabin-scuttle, — his living foot advanced upon the deck, as if to step; his hat slouched heavily over his eyes; so that however motionless he stood, however the days and nights were added on, that he had not swung in his hammock; yet hidden beneath that slouching hat, they could never tell unerringly whether, for all this, his eyes were really closed at times. . . ." (Chapter CXXX).

Yet the moral coward Jonah fleeing the wrath of God is not, after all, much like the tragically proud and blasphemously defiant whaling captain, king of his own world by virtue of "natural selection." Melville had no intention of creating a latter-day Jonah but rather, probably, of demonstrating men's eternal unwillingness to act according to the divine plan.

—Lyle H. Kendall, Jr.

FINANCIAL REPORT

On Hand, Jan. 1, 1955	$ 45.80
Income, 1955	153.21
Total	$199.01
Expenses, 1955	
Printing	$ 85.53
Postage	43.69
Stationery & supplies	11.76
Convention costs	7.80
Total	$148.78
On Hand, Dec. 20, 1955	$ 50.23

Gil Wilson's lecture tour with his illustrations of *Moby-Dick* will start on February 21.

THE *Melville Society* NEWSLETTER IS PUBLISHED QUARTERLY FOR MEMBERS OF THE Melville Society, a group of literary scholars and others interested in the life and works of Herman Melville. The Society seeks to facilitate the exchange of information among its members, to stimulate the study of Melville's life and works, and to encourage literary, historical, and bibliographical research. Membership is two dollars per year and includes all services of the Society. Associate membership (non-voting) is one dollar per year and includes all issues of the Newsletter. Address Tyrus Hillway, secretary, at Colorado State College, Greeley, Colorado.